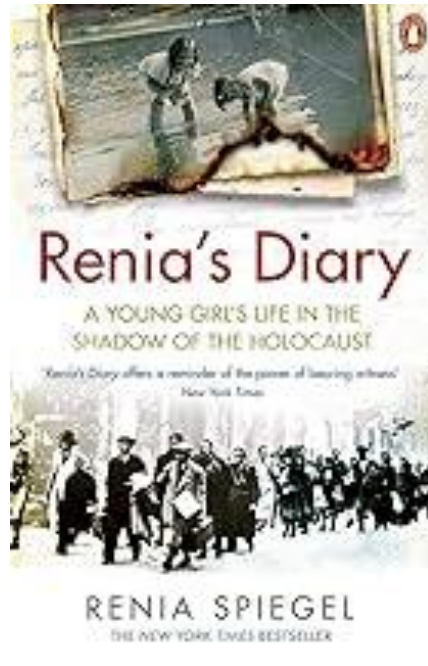


## Deciphering the Suffering of Women in *Renia's Diary*

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### Abstract

The experience of Holocaust was a prolonged experience of trauma for the victims, which created a routine of terror, fear, and disintegration in them. These have been recorded in their autobiographies or biographies in detail. Such life writings are subjective accounts of incidents or events from a perspective different from that of mere historical documentation of an event. *Renia's Diary* is a journal written by a teen victim of the events as they had been happening during the time of war, which contains the journaling of her life before the atrocities started and then also during the suffering and her attempted escape. As Amos Goldberg points out, the purpose of children's diaries has less to do with documentation and more to do with the internal and emotional dialogue. This paper attempts to interpret the diary to analyse the suffering of women.

**Keywords:** *Renia's Diary*, Holocaust, Life Narratives, Diaries.

## Introduction

Diaries and memoirs provide direct insight into the horrors of the Holocaust through first person narrative, Writing about their experience not only provides a subjective account of the events but also gives space to voice out emotions. As Leena Kurvet-Käosaar points out what Gilmore says about

Autobiographical representations of trauma make an invaluable contribution to the study of literature and culture. They offer indispensable eyewitness accounts of large-scale and everyday violence and, through their elaboration of specific scenes of terror and trauma, provide an anti-dote to universalizing narratives about evil, suffering and history. (305)

Everyone suffered the same event, but it was experienced differently by different individuals, this experience differing from gender to gender as well. Samuel Totten reiterates a similar idea in his introduction to *Plight and Fate of Women During and Following Genocide* when he writes:

The plight and fate of female victims during the course of genocide is both similar to and, in some respects, radically and profoundly different from their male counterparts. During the course of genocide, female victims, like males, suffer demonization, ostracism, discrimination, and the deprivation of their basic human rights. Likewise, they are often rounded up, deported, and killed. But, unlike most men, they have also been subjected to rape, gang rape, and mass rape. (1)

Women had to go through atrocities that were different from what men had experienced and the vulnerability of being a woman during a conflict added to their sufferings. Similarly, in his article, *Memory and the Holocaust: processing the past through a gendered lens*, Mushaben, while referring to Ofer and Weitzman, writes:

Female scholars provide concrete evidence that ‘although men and women were equally targeted for death, their paths – especially in the early years of the war – were paved with different regulations, work requirements, opportunities and constraints’. Under traditional family structures, men enjoyed more contacts with ‘the outside world’, and thus seemed better assimilated. Women, however, were more attuned to local culture; girls unable to attend Torah schools learned to speak fluent Polish and German, appeared more ‘secular’, and developed a facility for networking, contributing to their later survival. Men suffered

from lost 'identities', given this form of role reversal, while women were affected more negatively by the loss of sociability. (17)

The study highlights the importance of women's voices and experiences in historical memory. Eglitis mentions how "the conscious inclusion of women's experiences in Holocaust history was fostered by efforts that took root in the 1980s" (524). Other elaborate works by J Ringelheim (1985), ER Baer, M Goldenberg (2003), J Ringelheim, D Ofer, LJ Weitzman (1998) Z Waxman (2017), M Goldenberg, A Shapiro (2013) and many others have focused on the experiences and perceptions of women during the Holocaust and have also helped establish and distinguish the suffering of men from that of women.

There have been studies that have focused on the experiences of women, this paper however attempts to decipher the sufferings of women as seen through the lens of a child that knows and understands little of the background to the war. "Holocaust narratives by and about children are characterized by their narrator's innocence and inability to understand. In this way, child's-eye-view texts are not unusual but exemplary representations of the event (Sue Vice 164)."

Young women and girls took different roles in the ghettos as the circumstances around them changed, they had to often become the providers for families and had to take over roles which were not present before the war started like assuming leadership in some communities and such other roles that have been discussed by Dalia Ofer in a chapter titled *Gender: Writing Women, Writing the Holocaust (2011)*. In the same discussion she also highlights how the narratives of women paid attention to details and were expressed with emotions, and self-awareness. Not only are the interpretations of young adults and children often less differentiated than that of an adult, but also are the interpretations of young women more coloured owing to a more traditional and restrictive upbringing (Bitunjac and Markowska-Manista 65). Moreover, the understanding and experiences of young women were often different from that of older women.

Reading perspectives of young women provides one with a nuanced picture of the society subtly highlighting the experiences and differences of young women from that of the adults.

"The viewpoint of the child shifts the whole discourse since children possess sensibilities that are often lost in adults... Therefore, war narratives as related by children or from their perspective gain a much significant potency." (Hevesiova 91)

Moreover, Sue Vice (2) has argued that "children's accounts of the Holocaust are worthy of attention as a matter of perspective." She also argues that "Representing a child's voice means that his or her own language would have to be present in a text. On the other hand, representing a

child's viewpoint usually means that an adult narrator describes how events seemed to his or her younger self.” (Vice 11) The point of narration makes a difference to a child narrating his or her experience is different from the adult talking about the role of the child to narrate his or her experience.

### **Renia Spiegel**

For Renia Spiegel her *Diary* was her friend and confidante with whom she shared her everyday worries and joys. She started writing her diary on January 31, 1939, when Poland was under Soviet rule. Through her diary we see how antisemitism spread slowly in Poland and how Jews had been affected by the slow but steady change amidst the war. Renia’s diary entries however seem to focus on the futile heartbreaks in friendships and relationships compared to what was happening in Poland at that time. It seems like she was focusing not on the war *per se* and it seemed not very important. Her diary provides an emotional insight through which she was able to cope when the times were tough. It is a suffering which was more psychological which Renia’s seemed to be avoiding talking directly about.

In his study analysing stroke patients’ suffering through diaries, A. Alaszewski maintains that:

“An alternative approach, and one which directly addresses the experience of suffering, is to treat texts such as diaries as a representation, albeit a potentially distorted representation, of personal experience and through systematic analysis seek to develop an understanding or theory about suffering. This alternative approach involves using the material recorded in the diary as the record of some aspect of social reality that is external to the text they are analysing and the text describes and can be used to build up a picture of this external reality whatever aspect the scientist is interested in events, actions, perceptions and emotions,” (44)

In the same manner the paper has used an alternative approach to interpret the suffering of women in Renia’s *Diary*. Here the social reality transcends to the reality of Holocaust that existed outside the inner turmoil. The reality was that she was facing the suffering of a young girl while the events were unfolding. As the diary spans a few years, it shows a series of different events and is not just focused on the sufferings alone but of her life in the ghetto. The prices of goods also rising which added to the sufferings.

Now people seem to be only interested in material things. Which is not surprising at all, since a goose costs 100 złoty, and used to cost 4 złoty; a liter of milk costs 3.50 złoty, and used to cost 15 groszy; a pair of shoes— 300 złoty, and it used to be 12 złoty.... I have decided to have a photo taken, as there isn’t much one can do with money anyway. You

peep out into the street and all you see is lines, lines everywhere, people waiting in lines to buy bread, butter, sugar, eggs, thread, shoes—everything. And if you think that after five hours of waiting you might get anything else on top of bread, you are very, so very wrong. And if you, by any chance, would like to buy two loaves of bread, better be careful, you profiteer. (January 26, 1940)

Women were the ones who were left behind to take care of the families. The rising prices added onto the troubles of these women who were trying to manage the household when the husbands were not around. Even though Renia does not mention this in her diary it was evident that women were taking care of the families. Moreover, things of necessity were being taken away from them or simply being restricted. “This life is terrible. We’re yellow, pale, from this cellar life—from the lack of water, comfortable beds and sleep” (September 18, 1939) She writes on December 28, 1941, “Yesterday coats, furs, collars, oversleeves, hats, boots were being taken away on the street. And now there’s a new regulation that under pain of death it is forbidden to have even a scrap of fur at home.” In the notes Renia’s sister mentions how the men and women were being stripped off their fur on the streets and women were at times asked to remove shoes and had to walk home in their stockings, adding to their humiliation.

Renia’s reality is distorted, she is only able to comprehend what is going around by not focusing on it. As Goldberg notes, “the narrator’s emotional detachment from the event, even when describing a personal experience, is one of the clinical manifestations of trauma” (166). It can be observed that Renia focuses more on what is happening in her mind rather than what is happening outside, which can be interpreted as a clinical manifestation of trauma.

Renia’s dissociation from reality is made clearer through the notes provided by Ariana, her sister. She provides notes on what was happening and how the events unfolded; she gives a clearer picture of the ghetto situation or the general situation in Przemysl. Her notes provide a contrasting reality to what was happening outside Renia’s mind. Despite the dissociation we can argue that there is fear and anxiety evident in her writing. We cannot deny that Renia was not dissociating her thoughts while the horrors were unfolding. By not focusing on the war too much, she is still able to relay a lot of horrors that they had to go through; by talking about her friends and family she highlights their sufferings as women, their fears and hardships.

In her diary entry on April 24, 1940 she writes “I have so many jumbled thoughts in my head, so many. I should perhaps start with the fact that terrible things have been happening. There were unexpected nighttime raids that lasted three day” and in the same diary she has an entry “ About this Holender boy I have mentioned: I fell in love, I chased him like a madwoman,” This instance highlights how her mind was slowly dissociating from the harsh

reality in order to cope with it. It also shows, as Dumitru Tucan points out, the “dissimulation and repression of painful thoughts and memories as she lived and wrote in horrific times” (1067).

Moreover, we observe a kind of persistent trauma that Renia undergoes through the years that she writes in the diary. There was a constant fear of bombing and of war which occupied the minds of the people. Goldberg talks about “persistent trauma which was a prolonged experience for the victims of the Holocaust, where “a kind of routine and its violent unraveling are constantly intertwined” that “creates a routine of terror, fear, and disintegration” (39). Her diary reflects the constant anxiety and threat to life. In the years that she writes her diary, there are multiple instances where she mentions the fear of bombing, the gas attacks, searches, killing, and mass murders. She notes:

“The city is surrounded. Food is in short supply.... This life is terrible. We’re yellow, pale, from this cellar life—from the lack of water, comfortable beds and sleep.” (September 18, 1939)

“War again, war between Russia and Germany. The Germans were here, then they retreated. Horrible days in the basement. The city has been evacuated.” (June 26, 1941)

“Why do we live in fear of searches and arrests? Why can’t we go for a walk, because “children” throw stones? And why, why, why?” (August 16, 1941)

These are just examples of a few entries where she expressed her worries related to what was happening. It can be argued that most of her entries do not evidently show a gendered perspective of the trauma or the sufferings. She expresses her perspectives and her own understanding of events happening around her, which might not be consciously gendered.

When she writes about mothers clinging to their children, the pain and separation felt by other women echoes. Her voice could anticipate the suffering that women in general suffer. “I’ve realized that mother and child are the closest beings after all. I understand that I am to Mom what my child would be to me“(January 1, 1942)

They also suffered from a loss of identity, “I want to speak with you as a free person still. Today I’m like everyone else ... Tomorrow, along with other Jews, I’ll have to start wearing a white armband.” (July 1, 1941)

She mentions “sexual murders” only once in her diary, but this might have been a constant threat and fear among the women and they had to be conscious of and careful about it. They had to work “Today I had work (physical, of course), one gets bread for it, I also got potatoes, that is I have had a victory in the field of provisioning” (July 6, 1941). They also had



to acquire a work pass in order to avoid deportation, which is seen in her later entries. The constant worry of being deported, sent to a ghetto occupied the minds of these girls and was a common cause of anxiety in everyone.

The innocence and maturity in her voice narrates the story of her life that she saw and lived, striving through the harsh realities and coping through life and growing up. At a vulnerable stage of her life she was living through the complexities of war and the impending war and losing her life for not being able to escape. The story of Renia however doesn't end with her death, her story is carried forward by her boyfriend Zygmunt and sister Ariana who could escape and live a life despite the grief and sorrow.

### **Conclusion**

The instances that we find in Renia's Diary barely touch upon the sufferings of women during the Holocaust.

The diary was written in a span of around three to four years, her entries seem to be avoiding topics. She might have dissociated from what was happening outside by avoiding them when writing her diary, which acted as her sole escape. Her dissociation might be an effect of prolonged trauma and uncertainty that she was in. Moreover, the sudden shifts of emotions are very evident in her diary where she constantly moves from one topic to the next. Due to the fragmentation of her narration and constant avoidance and dissociation it becomes difficult to analyse the overwhelming suffering and pain. Moreover, *Renia's Diary* is marked with a sense of dissociation where Renia is constantly running away from reality and focusing on relationships, love, friendship. This constant dissociation is not only a part of innocence but also an aspect of trauma where the mind is trying to escape. However, despite the fragmentation of narration and the dissociation, *Renia's Diary* forms an important part of the study of the Holocaust in Poland and we can still find instances of women suffering. The menial tasks and roles that were suddenly assigned to us and the loss of dignity and identity also contributed the suffering of women. The displacement and distance from family and loved ones seemed to be one of the most important aspects of suffering in women as represented in this diary. Even Renia discussed her suffering in the context of being separated and distanced from her parents and loved ones during the atrocity.

The child's voice is very evident in *Renia's Diary* that focuses on discussing the inner turmoil that is more important to the child than the events that might have a historical unfolding. The paper tried to explore the sufferings of women from a child's perspective, where the perspective is often scaffolded by happenings that do not burden the author. The diary also highlights the unrepresentability of real time horrors.

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